

A PROGRAM FOR PROVIDING SUPERVISED CHILD VISITATION: A DEMONSTRATION PROJECT USING SENIOR CITIZENS AS SUPERVISORS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Study Conducted by:
David L. Rosenhan
LaDoris H. Cordell

The purpose of this demonstration project, conducted from 1989-1991, was to increase the ease and availability of supervised visitation for noncustodial parental visits by training senior citizens to be supervisors. A research component was designed to (1) evaluate the psychological adjustment of the child visiting with the noncustodial parent under the supervision of the senior citizen supervisor; and (2) examine whether visitation remains more consistent and regular for families in a structured visitation program than for those not in such a program.

PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

Supervisor Recruitment

Senior citizens in seven San Jose senior citizen centers were asked to volunteer to be supervisors for visits between a child and parent who had been ordered into supervised visitation. Considerable attention was given to designating which senior centers would be used for the program. In order to reduce linguistic and cultural stress on the participants, senior centers with an array of ethnic constituencies were sought.

In total, 33 senior citizens participated in the program: 29 women and 4 men. Like the families using the supervised visitation service, the seniors involved in the program were ethnically diverse: 14 Hispanic, 13 Caucasian, 2 African-American, 2 Filipino, 1 Dutch, and 1 Vietnamese.

Supervisor Training

The senior training program was crucial to the project's success. The sessions were designed not only to provide the seniors with information, but to involve them in role playing so that they could gain practical experience. The training program was initiated with two three-hour sessions and continued on a bimonthly basis with ample question-and-answer discussion periods included in all phases of the training. The components of the program are outlined below.

Training session #1: The first half of the initial training session allowed the trainers to meet the seniors, explain the program, introduce the concept of supervised visitation, and present basic child development information. The project director, the principal investigator, and a family court judge presented information and answered questions. A videotape produced by the Bar Association of San Francisco entitled "Still Our Children" was shown, describing the effects of divorce on children and demonstrating how the mediation process works for families.

Seniors were instructed that their role was to be nonintrusive, while ensuring that inappropriate behavior was not taking place during the parent/child visits. After assisting the parent and child over the initial awkwardness, they were asked to sit away from the parent and child and engage in other activity, while continuing to watch the interaction. Seniors were not to impose their ideas on the family; however, parents who whispered, passed notes, or displayed other suspicious behaviors were cause for the supervisors to intervene during the visit.

Seniors were told that their work would be difficult at times because the children and parents with whom they would interact were likely to have various negative emotions regarding the experience. The purpose of this part of the training was to encourage the seniors to think about how they might react to various situations.

Safety issues were addressed during the second half of the initial training session. A San Jose police officer spent considerable time ensuring that seniors understood the appropriate actions to take should a parent arrive intoxicated or make threats of physical violence. Role-plays in which problems occurred were used to help the seniors learn ways to anticipate a crisis. The presentation was intended to make seniors aware of the potential for violence and to provide them with practice in dealing with such situations.

Training session #2: The objective of the second training was to provide the seniors with hands-on experience as supervisors by having them participate in role playing. Several hypothetical situations, each geared to raise a specific problem, were presented. The first role-play, entitled "The Rebellious Child," involved a child who did not want to visit, a supervisor, and a visiting parent. The second scenario concerned interaction among a withdrawn child, a visiting parent, and a supervisor. "The Late Father" and "The Late Mother" were the themes of the third and fourth role-plays.

Following the role-plays, a commentator reviewed all the scenarios and discussed the different styles exhibited by the players. The most common problem that the seniors demonstrated was over-involvement in the parent-child dyad. Considerable time was spent explaining the importance of remaining neutral when supervising the visits.

Ongoing training: Once the program began, ongoing support/training sessions continued to be held on a bimonthly basis. Seniors used these forums to air some of their concerns surrounding the visitations they supervised, including persistent tardiness by the parents, unruly children, and custodial parents who refused to leave during the visitation. In addition to the ongoing training, a group of seniors visited the courthouse to observe family court proceedings.

Supervisor Honoraria

Seniors were given an honorarium of \$10 for each hour visit they supervised. Compensation was considered essential for the success of the program. The term "honorarium" as

opposed to "pay," was used to make clear that the seniors are being recognized for their efforts despite the relatively low level of remuneration.

PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS

The participants in this program were the children of divorcing parents who had been court-ordered or referred by family court services into supervised visitation in Santa Clara County. The noncustodial parents were ordered into the program because of alleged or proven domestic violence, child abuse, or substance abuse. In some cases, there were also concerns that the parent would flee with the child.

During a two-year period, 127 families with 182 children participated in the program. The population served was ethnically and economically diverse. Typically, families remained in the program for less than one year, with the average length of stay being six months. Families terminated their participation in the program for any of the following reasons:

- The family court case had concluded, and the court made new orders for unsupervised visits.
- The parents agreed to terminate the visits.
- The hostility between the parents had dissipated so that the parents agreed that supervised visitation was no longer needed.
- The noncustodial parent dropped out of the program and no longer visited.
- Either the custodial or noncustodial parent relocated outside the area.
- The court, upon request of the project director, terminated visits due to a parent's inappropriate conduct or failure to regularly appear for visits as ordered.

Each parent was charged \$10-\$15 per one-hour visit. The fee was waived or reduced for those who could not afford it. Phone calls and letters were frequently used to collect the fee, with judicial intervention used less often. Although the parent fees were collected to offset the cost of the supervisor honoraria, it may have been more efficient to build the honoraria funds into the program budget given the staff time required to collect the fees.

PROGRAM EVALUATION METHODS

The study design proposed to examine the effects of structured supervised visitation on the post-divorce adjustment of children by randomly assigning families to either the structured visitation group or a comparison group in which parents would have to make their own visitation arrangements. The following four measures were used in the study.

Measures

1. The Child Behavior Checklist: The Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983) is designed to assess the behavioral problems and social competence of children ages 4 to 16.¹

2. Custodial Parent Interview: Interviews with the custodial parent in the treatment group were conducted at the time of post-test data collection by a graduate student in psychology with no prior contact with the project. A fixed interview schedule was developed in order to explore each case in a more qualitative and anecdotal fashion. The interview included questions about changes in the child's behavior at home and school, the child's academic performance, the child's reaction to supervised visitation, and the number of visits that had occurred. Questions regarding problems with the supervised visitation were also asked, as were questions about the child's relationship with siblings.

3. Supervisor's Evaluation Form: Finally, supervisor's evaluation of each visit was recorded on a form to provide subjective data regarding families in the treatment group. The supervisor was asked to indicate whether the child arrived on time for the visit, whether the noncustodial parent brought the child a snack or toy, and how the child behaved in the company of each parent. The supervisor was also encouraged to make any additional comments. These questionnaires were intended only to provide an understanding of the nature of the visit, not to assess child adjustment, and consequently the data from this form were not used in the analysis.

Selected Study Participants

Study participants were selected from the pool of families who had been ordered into supervised visitation in Santa Clara County and were randomly assigned to the treatment or comparison group. All study families had children 4 and 12 years old. A consent form was signed by the parents signifying their voluntary participation in the program. The families assigned to the treatment group were aware that they were participating in a new program and were given a full description of the project.

The children in the treatment and comparison groups were well matched demographically. The treatment group included 20 children: 9 boys and 11 girls. There were 10 children in the comparison group: 6 boys and 4 girls. In both groups, the children were primarily Caucasian, the mean age was 7 years old, and the socioeconomic status was bimodally distributed.

Study Procedures

Families in both the treatment and comparison groups held an intake session with the project director. A confidential intake form that asked for demographic data, financial information, and current legal status was completed by the custodial parents. The custodial parents in the treatment group were also asked to sign the Visitation Disclosure Agreement, which gave permission for project staff to disclose visitation information to the project director, family court services mediators/evaluators, the family court judge, and attorneys. Custodial parents in both groups were given the CBCL during this intake session, shown how to complete them, and instructed to mail the forms to the project director within a week. The CBCL was to be completed by the custodial parent.

The first parent/child visit for the treatment group was arranged within one to two weeks of the intake session. The families in the comparison group were not to receive any assistance in obtaining supervised visitation, which is the typical situation.

Three to four months after intake, the parents were asked to complete the CBCL for the second time. Tests were mailed to the custodial parent with a stamped, self-addressed envelope and an instruction to return the tests within one week. Interviews with the custodial parent were scheduled after the questionnaires were returned.

Visits between the noncustodial parent and child occurred in the senior citizen centers. The rooms that were set aside for the visits were furnished with toys and stuffed animals. Evaluation forms were completed by the supervisors immediately after each visit.

RESULTS

Two important facts should be kept in mind when reviewing the study results. First, this was a small-scale, exploratory study that should be replicated on a larger sample in order to test the hypotheses generated from the findings. Second, the study design called for a comparison group that was to seek a visitation supervisor without outside assistance. Unfortunately, this part of the research design was not properly executed, and members of the comparison group were referred to a private party to act as a paid supervisor, thereby narrowing the gap between the treatment and comparison group.

1. Treatment/comparison group analysis: Despite the fact that comparison group participants were given some guidance in finding supervised visitation, the families participating in the treatment group had a higher average number of visits per month than families in the comparison group.
2. CBCL scores and frequency of visits: Difference scores were computed between pre- and post-test scores on the CBCL. The treatment and comparison groups were combined to examine the effect of visitation frequency on the scores. There was no correlation between frequency of visits and improvement on behavior problem scales, but the correlation between visits and improvement on the social competence scale was marginally significant. The relationship between this finding and key parent and child characteristics requires additional study.
3. Treatment group CBCL scores: Children in the treatment group were divided into three groups. The *Substantial Improvement* group consisted of six children who showed large positive change scores on both the social and behavior scales. The second group, which showed *Mixed or Modest Improvement*, had nine children with either a mix of a positive and a negative change score on the two scales or relatively small positive change scores. The third group, which reflected *Negative Change*, included five children who had negative change scores on both of the scales. Post-hoc analyses were used in an attempt to explain these outcomes.

One theory, based on observation, was that self-involved custodial parents had children who were having more difficulty adjusting in the post-divorce period. To test this hypothesis, a parental self-involvement scale was developed to analyze the interview data. The results indicated that children with substantial improvement were less likely to have a parent who was rated as self-involved than those with mixed or negative change. These results are quite tentative coming from post-hoc examination; however, they identify an area for further study.

Taking into account the small sample size, the results seem to bring into question a possible association between the children's outcomes and whether they were visiting a parent who had allegedly abused them. In this study, none of the children who showed substantial improvement were visiting a parent who had allegedly abused them. Three of the nine children with modest improvement, and three of the five children who showed negative change were visiting parents who had allegedly abused them. Including alleged child abuse victims in this type of supervised

visitation program requires careful further evaluation and research to identify how to serve the best interests of these children.

CONCLUSION

The success of the Santa Clara County Supervised Visitation Project indicates that it is possible to provide a structured visitation center for children and noncustodial parents by recruiting and training senior citizens as supervisors. Families are now regularly referred to the program from a variety of sources, and it has gained support from foundations and other charitable institutions. It has served as the model for a similar program now under way in San Mateo County. Project personnel have consulted with many others about initiating supervised visitation programs.

This study identified several important areas for further study of structured, supervised visitation programs. As an increasing number of programs go into operation, it will be important to develop criteria to identify families who would not benefit from supervised visitation, to define client profiles so that the programs are designed with users' needs in mind, and to initiate and maintain feedback systems to systematically obtain clients' evaluation of the programs.

NOTES

¹ The CBCL consists of 118 items related to behavior problems that are scored on a 3-point scale with each point designated as not true, sometimes true, or often true. There are also 20 social competency items used to obtain the parent's report of the amount and quality of their child's participation in sports, hobbies, games, activities, organizations, jobs and chores, friendships, how well the child gets along with others and plays and works alone, and school functioning. The CBCL has been shown to have adequate reliability across time intervals. Demographic variables such as ethnic background and socioeconomic status have been shown to account for a relatively small proportion of score variance.

REFERENCES

Achenbach, T.M., & Edelbrock, C.S. (1983). *Manual for the Child Behavior Checklist and Revised Child Profile*. New York: Queen City Publishers.

David R. Rosenhan is a Professor of Law at Stanford University

LaDoris H. Cordell is currently a Superior Court Judge in Santa Clara County